Walking In My Sleep by ButterCowLuvr

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Summary: Throughout the first half of 1984, Mike Wheeler began to experience a form of grief he wasn't prepared for. Will he eventually give up hope that he would ever see Eleven again?

Walking In My Sleep

The breeze wouldn't let up, becoming a biting force against a figure trailing along the uneven ground of the nearby woods. He was out of breath, having searched unsuccessfully for nearly two hours again. Mike Wheeler looked up at the sky and the incoming cloud cover, his brow furrowed. 'Not yet, please...'. It was a plea that hummed in his mind often: whenever his mother asked him about the blanket fort he had yet to take down, whenever he thought of maybe this one time keeping his SuperCom in his room for the night instead of in the basement, whenever he uncovered that yellow Benny's Burgers t-shirt he had kept hidden in the closet, not daring to get rid of it. Now, he was once again angry, this time at the weather.

Sighing loudly and in dismay, he squeezed his eyes shut because he knew the tears would come in a matter of seconds. He leaned heavily against the trunk of an old tree, bracing himself because it still hurt to think of her. It hurt a lot. Eleven had to be out there. What if there was one place he hadn't looked yet? What if he had more time?

A whimper escaped him as a rush of hope and memories came flooding back. He was there in that classroom, watching her break into tiny black pieces. He remembered that night he cried to exhaustion. He remembered talking with the guys about how she was only hiding, she wasn't really dead, and he especially remembered their sympathetic stares and half-hearted shrugs.

Now fully kneeling, he didn't care that his face was uncomfortably pressed against the rough edges of the tree trunk. He ignored it as he cried and heaved and cried some more. Wiping it away became useless in the end. He was sick of crying, sick of feeling hopeless.

After a while, something startled him, something that had never happened before when he got upset. Quickly, his hand reached up to trace his nostrils and upper lip. It came away with blood.

March 1984

Karen Wheeler had announced that day would be dedicated to spring cleaning. Mike had been 'assigned' the basement of course since "You

spend so much time down there anyway and I can really use the help!". Radioing Lucas that they had to cancel their scheduled D&D session because of a stupid cleaning day (and trusting his friend to notify the other two), he signed off with a sigh and slowly shuffled down to the basement.

Gazing around, it slightly amazed him how much more he noticed about it in the still quiet. The couch near the far wall with its messy blanket cover, some decorative boxes with years worth of old stuff piled in a corner, the desk and lamp next to the blanket fort.

The supercom still clutched in his clammy hands, Mike knelt in front of the neatly arranged pillows and blankets and set the device in its usual place. He always had to do this every night. It was ritualistic yet soothing. *And completely pathetic.* Ten minutes passed by as he waited. Always waited. His brow furrowed at the familiar knobs and antenna, wishing for a crinkle of static as his breath began to get away from him again.

'Get up and clean already, Wheeler. You're being a baby,' he harshly scolded. And with that, he reigned in that momentary struggle for control and swallowed his disappointment.

Thirty minutes of distracted tidying up helped quite a bit, and Mike barely registered the footsteps stomping down the stairs until he turned to face Dustin, followed by Will and Lucas.

"Hey, man. We came to see you," Lucas spoke first. Dustin had made himself comfortable in one of the chairs, and Will quickly excused himself to the bathroom.

"Lucas, I told you I can't play today," Mike said, slightly annoyed as he fiddled with a broom.

"We know that," Dustin replied from his spot. "But we were bored and figured we'd help out." The boy grinned widely, then lazily swiped a hand over their board game table to clear off some crumbs. "Shouldn't be too hard, right?"

Mike glared at the mess just made and rolled his eyes. "Fine, but you for real have to help out." Both friends murmured their response and

each grabbed supplies. And Mike was glad he wasn't alone anymore.

They made quick work of the floors and windows and soon Dustin and Lucas were joking around as usual, significantly lightening the mood. Will, after finally coming back from his bathroom break (he had been in there for a worryingly long time, Mike noticed), the boy went to work gathering up papers and straightening boxes, trying to avoid their gazes.

The steady work was interrupted by Dustin's gasp and a shout of "Look what I found!" as he pulled a large round object out from underneath the couch. "I thought you'd lost this for good, Mike."

Mike peered over and froze. It was the Millennium Falcon toy, the same one he had kicked underneath the bed last year in a desperate attempt to forget about Eleven, about that sweet girl he pulled out of the rain and wanted to know so much about.

"Uh yeah. You can just...put it in the closet shelf over there." Mike made an uncaring gesture with his hand and ignored Lucas' curious stare. His first best friend had always known how to read him the best, but Mike wasn't going to let him get close today. His nose was already starting to burn.

Holding the Falcon toy out in front of him, Dustin smiled fondly as he pretended to make it fly, letting out spaceship noises here and there while 'flying' it to the closet. Mike squeezed his eyes shut and wished he had the ability to mute noises. *She* would have been able to make it fly for real but she's gone, she's gone, she's gone...

'she's gone, she's gone she's gone...'

"Mike?" A hand squeezed his shoulder. Right, Lucas was still standing there. "You alright?" his friend asked with concern. Slowly, he opened his eyes as water clouded his vision. 'No, not in front of Lucas!' he pleaded. Shrugging off his friend's touch and nodding, he concentrated his attention back to the old fashioned glassware he'd been polishing with a cloth. Distraction often helped.

Completely oblivious to Mike's dilemma, Will chimed in innocently from across the room. "Hey, Dustin. Didn't you tell me a story about

how you tried to get El to levitate that?"

That did it. And he thought he'd been doing well. So startled was he by the mention of her name again out loud that he dropped one of the glass cups, shattering it. He choked back a sob, but it only intensified the pain and anger. 'El...that's right. Dustin was treating her like a dog but she's amazing and strong and brave...' Silence filled the room as his three friends stood there, shocked and alarmed, Mike frantic and distraught and embarrassed. So he fled.

"Mike? Mike!" They kept calling him, asking him where he was going, what was wrong. He barely managed to get out the word 'bathroom' before climbing the stairs two at a time and racing down the hall and to the upstairs bathroom.

The steady stream of tears made it difficult to see himself in the mirror, but what he did see horrified him: a red nose, and from it a steady flow of blood poured. Shaking hands reached for the toilet paper, taking a wad to his face and leaning forward. It was heavier this time around, and he tried to stay calm even though his heart ached and his head pounded and blood started to soak up the paper too fast but he didn't care. He just wanted Eleven back from the dead. He wanted to feel happy again. He wanted to not close his eyes and relive her fading away.

The bleeding wasn't stopping. Why wasn't it stopping? Ten minutes rolled around and two more wads of toilet paper were replaced. He'd finally settled on leaning against the lower cabinets while waiting. Slow breaths in, slow breaths out. Nothing was distracting enough in that bathroom, so he settled on tracing the wallpaper with his puffy eyes. At least the tears on his face began to dry. But his nose kept bleeding.

Soon a small hesitant knock pulled at his attention.

"Mike? It's me, Will. Are you doing okay?"

"Y-yeah I'm fine. I just...I'll be out soon. I must have eaten something bad for lunch..." A lame excuse, and he knew Will wouldn't buy it.

"Listen, I'm really sorry about what I said earlier. I shouldn't have

brought her up. I was stupid, Mike." Will's sad voice caused guilt to erupt within him. Of all the people he wanted to hide his agony from, Will was at the top of the list.

"I'm sorry too, Will. I'll be fine. Just give me a few minutes."

"Okay. I'll be right outside."

Another ten minutes passed before Mike finally emerged, exhausted and hollow. When the two made it back to the basement, the broken glass was cleaned up, the floor swept, and his friends clustered around him in warmth.

May 1984

The call of a northern cardinal pierced the morning air of the woods, startling a lone figure to jolt awake. Mike felt stiff as he lay sprawled in weeds by a clearing, the sun still making its way above the tree tops. Squinting in the dim light, he raised his head slightly and noticed a green jacket, his, draped over him. Confusion clouded his head. He didn't remember falling asleep here of all places. Mike wasn't prone to sleepwalking, however he wasn't about to rule out the idea that perhaps he could have walked all the way outside in his sleep?

He sat up with groan and sighed, brushing off soil and some dandelions from his jacket before standing. It was obvious he hadn't been feeling himself lately. Schoolwork, bullies, campaigns, chores...normally he could handle those things. But now a picture of a girl's brown eyes and short cropped hair flashed in his mind, all starting to become too much all at once. His heart squeezed as a sense of hopelessness came over him. Why hadn't she just let him help her? Why wasn't he strong enough to defeat the monster? If only he could see her again. If only –

"Mike?" a small, tentative voice called out. So familiar.

His heart leaped, eyes erratically scanning the brush for movement. "El?" he shouted hoarsely. He heard it echo once, twice, then...

"Mike! I'm here." Her voice grew louder and more distant, but not a

moment later he ran and plunged into the thicket leading away from the clearing. "El, where are you? Follow my voice. Please!" All around him was an endless maze of tree, brushes, vines, a beaten trail. In his anxiousness and adrenaline high he nearly toppled over a root, his mind racing with only the thought of getting to her in his mind.

Then, he heard his name again, this time much closer. "Mike, behind you." And this time he did actually trip, but not before an invisible force caught him from smashing to the ground.

Mike couldn't help it, he smiled in amazement and disbelief. The force holding him let loose enough to move upright, and soft hands gripped his shoulders, slowly turning him around to face her. There El stood, shyly smiling back at him with dirt smudges on her face and some tears in her clothes. She looked just as pretty as he remembered last November.

For so long he wanted her back, to look at her, to talk to her, to make sure she was always alright. In spite of all of that, he found himself unable to say anything at that moment. He just stared open-mouthed, a rush of feeling washing over him.

"Mike," she said again, letting her hands move from his shoulders to his hands. Her touch was tentative but very much real and reassuring. Mike eagerly took hold of her smaller, dirtier ones, finally coming to a sense that he should stop just staring.

"Um, w-where have you been all this time?" The question was practical, but definitely not what he wanted to say first. No, because her face was still so soft-looking and pretty, and in his head all he could repeat was 'I missed you, I missed you'.

El blinked at him, then glanced around at their surroundings, which were by now brightening up by the sun.

"Here. I've been here," she replied gently. Her eyes widening as if she wanted to say more, but couldn't.

Mike frowned. Clearly he wasn't going to get a straightforward answer from her. "Here. You mean in these woods? By yourself? But...I've looked everywhere in here."

"No, Mike. Here. In the upside down."

"Oh. Right," he muttered. Just the mention of the upside down again made him angry and sad all at once. But at least Eleven was here again. She made it out. She survived!

"I'm glad you're okay. How did you escape?" Something suddenly seemed off about her behavior. She was surprisingly calm for someone who had just escaped from that hell of a place.

That's when he noticed. Her face started to look weird, less clear. Her round eyes were getting paler, as was the rest of her head and hair. What was going on?

"El? Are you okay?" Worried now, he squeezed her hands, but found them missing between his fingers.

"El, what's happening?" Her entire face was now distorted as if smudged, like something from a cruel horror film. What was worse was that she was smiling at him, as if she knew this would happen, as if she were okay with it.

"N-no El. Stop! What are you doing?" Despite being frightened, he lunged forward and tried to hold her around the waist, but there was none to hold on to. She was actually fading. And she was smiling.

He woke up to darkness, shocked and bleary eyed. He didn't know how long he must have been crying in his sleep, but fumbling in the dark for the tissues he had now began to stock next to his bed, he yanked one up and smeared it clumsily across his nose and cheeks. He had no doubt it was probably bloody again. Fear and painful emotions pulsed through him, a combination of the horrible dream and blood leaking from his nose as if someone had punched him in the face. He reached for his nearby lamp and illuminated his pillow, now spotted with stains. Scowling and frustrated, Mike clenched the tissue hard and threw it lamely across the room. 'What is wrong with you?' He kept repeating. 'What is wrong with you, Mike?'

Several weeks passed following that incident. He had long since discarded his soiled pillowcase into a cramped hollow of his room, where his mother couldn't find it.

His moods began to get progressively agitated and he felt like a cloud of emptiness was hovering over him at all times. As the school year continued and it slowly reached the last week before summer, he searched his brain for possible causes of these nosebleeds. Obviously he had made the connection to El and her (dare he finally admit to it) sudden death, but he thought about her plenty of times before without his nose bleeding. Happy memories, mostly, whenever he ate Eggos for breakfast, or when his dad let him sit on the recliner sometimes.

Sitting alone with his homework on the dining room table, as he had declined yet another invitation to do homework with the guys after school, he took time to think. Was he getting sick? He knew nosebleeds happened for minor reasons (Lucas sometimes got them due to allergies), but getting them just by crying? Just by thinking about a girl? How stupid!

He still hadn't told his friends about them, especially not Will, who might end up feeling guilty for being back from that place. What would they think of him? He was supposed to be the one who the others relied on. He knew El's death affected them badly as well, but what had he been doing to comfort them? Hardly nothing it seemed. He felt like a robot going through school, handing in homework, getting pushed around by Troy and James. He still wrote campaigns, but he wasn't able to make them as good or elaborate as before, and he knew his friends noticed. One time, when asked about his withdrawn attitude by Dustin, he couldn't help but snap back. "Don't you have better things to do, Dustin? Like trail after that new girl, Max?"It was cruel and unwarranted, but he just wanted things to be normal again. He wanted to be normal again.

June 1864

It was only a matter of time before somebody found out.

One evening, Nancy had gotten up to use the restroom and noticed the door ajar and light on. She found Mike crouched against the far wall, head against his pulled up knees.

"Mike? Oh my gosh. Are you okay?" Rushing inside with worry, she knelt at his side and slowly tried to pull his face upward. What she

saw struck her deeply. Mike slowly raised his tired head and stared blankly into her face. Dried blood lightly coated his nose and chin as his sniffled softly. Then, her appearance began to register and he pulled away, scrambling up for an escape.

"N-Nancy-"

"Mike, what happened?" Nancy whispered, becoming alarmed and anxious. "Did you fall? I'm going to get Mom..." She said this all very quickly before turning around. But Mike had already blocked the door.

"Nancy, wait!" Mike got out, coughing and frowning at her. "Don't tell mom. I didn't fall. Just...I'll tell you okay? Just don't get mom..." His last words came out as a mumble as his cheeks reddened. How was he going to explain this?

Nancy sighed deeply, concerned and not very convinced. Mike then slid down the now closed door, folding his arms and looking away from her. Nancy mimicked his position, waiting to listen.

"I...I don't know what's wrong, but I...I keep getting nosebleeds whenever I...think of her. Whenever I get really upset."

Nancy was silent for a few moments, trying to think about what he was saying. "Oh Mike..." She made to grab for one of his hands but he flinched away. "I...how long has this been happening?" she asked pointedly, trying to get him to look at her.

"Several...several months ago," he managed to say, keeping his face to the tile floor.

"Months ago?! Mike..." Nancy began, but then quieted. Shouting was probably the last thing Mike needed right now. She didn't know much about El, as their encounter was brief, but she did know by how saddened Mike looked most of the time, that this El has become very important to him. And she knew the feeling quite well. Barb had died from the Demogorgon as well.

"I just miss her, okay?" His voice raised this time. "Really badly. I...I keep waiting and thinking she'll come back. She has to, okay? She

has to," he emphasized, this time looking at her with determination. "Listen, you might not believe me but I heard my supercom static earlier. It had to have been her. I tried to speak to her but...she left again." He began to explain.

Mike had been folding blankets in the basement to prepare for his night down there. He had taken to sleeping there at least once a week, claiming he was playing games and reading to the point where he usually crashed on the couch. A decent enough lie. His supercom was placed in the same spot as usual in the fort. Finally satisfied with the nest he made, he closed his eyes.

That was when the supercom began to beep and make static. At first it was so light he barely made it out, but then he jumped up as a loud pulse met his ears, scaring him off the couch and over to the fort. Could it be? "El? El are you there?" He adjusted the antennae and tried again. "El, can you hear me?" He thought he could make out something, a voice on the other side. But it was too faint. Through the static, a broken up voice registered. "El...please be there!" His voice cracked and his throat began to burn again. Hot tears rimmed his eyes and his head felt heavy. He felt the blood coming on again.

Nancy chose her next words carefully after listening. "You said you might have heard her?"

"Yes, it was her," he insisted.

Nancy nodded, mustering up a small smile, "Well that's good then, right? Listen, we don't know where she is, but if you said you heard her...I'll believe you." Nancy didn't want to give him too much hope that El might still be alive, but she had to give him something.

"I'm worried about your nosebleeds. Do they normally get this bad?"

Mike nodded silently, not wanting to tell her that this one wasn't the worst of them.

Gazing at him in sympathy, Nancy pulled herself up to get a washcloth from the drawer, wetting it before kneeling down and lightly washing away the blood that hadn't dried all the way. She remembered in her classes learning about the five stages of grief, how

much it can change a person, how much it takes a physical toll on the body. As she became a witness to this very reality in her brother (these nosebleeds mostly likely a result of hypertension, stress, and intense feeling all rolled into one) she felt useless in her ability to help him. What could she do to make him feel better as she grappled with her own feelings of a lost friend?

Finishing up his face, Nancy gave him another soft smile and patted his shoulder. She was nearly knocked over however, when Mike suddenly leaped forward and wrapped his arms around her neck tightly.

"Thanks, Nancy."

Nancy returned the hug, almost in tears herself.

"Remember what I told you, Mike? We tell each other everything okay?" She felt him nod against her as he started to sob.

The summer droned on silently. Now having an additional support in Nancy, Mike began to feel a little hopeful. He still tried to contact El every once in a while, trying not to lose hope that she wasn't really dead. His nosebleeds and crying spells were still intense a lot of times, and Nancy had taken to staying in his room some nights to help him get back to sleep. Her visits comforted her as much as they comforted him.

One night, while the boys were all together at his house in the basement, he mustered up the courage to apologize to them.

"Don't worry about it, dude," Dustin waved, sporting his good-natured smile.

"Yeah, we miss her too," Lucas chimed in, gazing at Mike's paler than usual face before continuing. "But Mike...we're here for you, man. Whatever you need to talk about."

Mike peered over at Will, hoping he didn't see the guilt or sadness, but Will just gave him an encouraging pat and grin. He then let himself relax.

"You guys are the best."

The new school year approached in August 1984 and the nosebleeds eventually became less and less. He still felt it, that overwhelming sense of loss and helplessness whenever he thought of something that reminded him of her. He considered once taking down that blanket fort but he couldn't bring himself too. Not yet. Just a little longer.

A/N: Just like to take the time to explain a few things. What Mike experienced in this fic is something that can really happen to someone while under extreme grief and stress (as I've unfortunately been a witness to it in real life). I'm not sure how plausible or common it is in children, though, so forgive me for that. I don't mean to offend. Other fun facts! The dream sequence was inspired by the song Akureyri by Crywolf. Also, the northern cardinal featured is the state bird of Indiana~ ^^ Title comes from lyrics to the song Diaries by The Birthday Massacre (which is a fantastic song y'all should listen).

Thanks for reading!